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Sociality, Socialities, and Sociality as a Causal Force

Michael Carrithers

When I agreed to write on sociality for this volume it seemed entirely appropriate. Howell has used the concept to great effect, both early in her career and recently (Howell and Willis 1989, Howell 2011); I used the term as a master key to human nature in general (Carrithers 1990, 1992, 2001, see also Bird-David 1994); and Marilyn Strathern applied the term, with broad and lasting effect, as a solvent to loosen crystallised ways of thinking about gender, kinship, personhood, and cultural difference (1988, 1996). Here I first look briefly across the sprawling territory that has been progressively conquered by ‘sociality’. It is a view which reveals disparate and sometimes even contradictory usages of the term, but also its productive fecundity as an anthropological-philosophical keyword.

Then, second, I will explore ethnographically one possible extension of ‘sociality’, or perhaps better, one possibility lying in its conceptual heart. I take the core meaning evoked by it, *the propensity of beings to associate with one another*, and push it a step further to argue that sociality, thus understood, may on occasion work as a distinct, separate and identifiable causal force in our present institutionalising human world. I write ‘institutionalising’ to mark one salient trait of the human world, its overflowing inventiveness in institutions. The ethnographic example I use for anthropological thinking, an institution among Buddhist forest monks in Sri Lanka, also suggests how old this habit of institutionalising is, and so how pervasive this causal force of sociality may be. But please note that I am not only interested here in sociality as a propensity for associating with one another as a necessary precondition for the creation and maintenance of institutions, but also as a powerful causal force which may work *against* institutions and the routine sociality on which institutions depend.

The broad brush

Since the late 1980's the term 'sociality' has taken wing 'on the winds of metaphor', in the felicitous image applied by Bert O. States elsewhere, and has gone from being for anthropologists what he called a 'proto-keyword' to being a keyword in fact (1996:1). It has taken on new meanings, each shaded differently from the next, and finally shading off into mutual contradiction. This is to a degree problematical, for we scholars and scientists tend to assume a solidity and rootedness in our words, a singleness of meaning, to support mutual intelligibility among us. But to insist too much on this univocality would be to miss the richness in (sociocultural) anthropologists' understanding of one another, a richness depending less on a repertoire of hard-edged terms than on softer resonances which may be called up by the use of a term or image among an already learned and knowledgeable readership.

The idea itself, pared back to its absolute minimum as *the propensity to associate with fellow beings*, says little explicitly, but therein lies its strength, for like other such abstractions, its very generality invites filling with meaningful and detailed content. Moreover, as a (very) abstract concept, sociality allows users to gather together many otherwise differing particularities and so to establish a view over a wide field. In that respect sociality possesses what Hans Blumenberg called a 'Zu-Viel' (Blumenberg 2007:17), a 'too-much', a powerful capacity to capture much, but also potentially to capture more than may have originally been meant. And therein lies its weakness as well. Blumenberg's analogy with a trap captures this ambivalence nicely: you could decide to apply your powerful rabbit trap in order to catch hedgehogs instead, and that is well and good; but you may also aim only to catch rabbits, and end up with a hedgehog you didn't want. Abstracts as useful as sociality tend to accrete more and more meanings and phenomena by their seductive plasticity, and then by the sheer fact of their use by more and more people.

In this respect sociality has followed — though more modestly — the course much earlier taken by 'culture'. Culture began life for anthropologists as a singular abstract noun with no plural: thus E.B.

Tylor wrote of it as a single entity of which different peoples might have different amounts. Franz Boas coined a plural for the word, and so offered a way of talking about what (American, cultural) anthropologists would study when they did fieldwork. Then time passed, 'cultures' were routinely studied, but 'culture' was also theorised this way and that, and in the midst of this process Geertz found reason to designate it a 'conceptual morass'. He used as prime example Clyde Kluckhohn's giving it more than eleven different definitions (Geertz 1973:4). But it is notable, too, that in the next paragraph Geertz went on to offer his own definition, namely the famous one of culture as the 'webs of significance' in which 'man' is suspended. Only recently have anthropologists sought to abandon the concept of culture, but there, still, the concept itself, however distended and weakened, hangs over the apparently new term 'ontology', and the interpretative practices that anthropologists applied under the heading of 'culture' continue serenely under 'ontology' (see Venkatesan et al. 2010).

'Sociality' has not been among anthropologists nearly as long as 'culture', nor has it been used nearly so widely, so it has not yet produced a morass, but it has at least managed what might look like a small murky puddle. Sociality followed the career of culture in that it began as a singular term (Strathern 1988, Carrithers 1992) but went on to become a plural (e.g. Gibson and Sillander 2011), there referring to the different ways of being social in different societies/scenes. And it has produced contradictions. Thus we have Howell, writing currently, designating sociality as an 'innate, presumably genetically inscribed predisposition in all human beings' to be keenly aware of, and responsive to, one another (Howell 2011: 43). In that version of sociality, this intense intersubjectivity with other human beings is of interest as a trait of our species alone. Yet we also have Tsing (2013), writing at practically the same time, making a good case for 'more-than-human' sociality to include associations between humans and fungi and other entities of the plant kingdom. And Moore (2013) writes of possible 'socialities of the inorganic', which would include humans with machines.

Each of these expansions of the term bears its own more or less defensible rhetorical logic, and the consequence is, for good or ill, that it is necessary to follow that rhetoric back to its source to discover the sense of ‘sociality’ meant: we cannot read the term as lucid in itself. Thus, for example, Tsing’s use of ‘sociality’ depends on beginning from one of sociality’s possible entailments, namely that those beings included within the same sphere of sociality are of heightened importance to one another, compared to beings which fall outside that sphere; and so by promoting trees and fungi to partners in sociality with humans, we also promote the importance of those otherwise unprivileged beings. Hence what might appear at first as a purely descriptive abstract term, sociality as a property of beings which associate with one another, becomes in this usage a moral and prescriptive property. And in this case that rhetorical move is bolstered by a larger *climate* — how appropriate a word! — within which anthropologists have found it ever more urgent to see our species as entwined, dangerously, disastrously, with our larger world.

Sociality-e

So there is no single compelling logic in the usages of sociality, but rather a rhetorical potential which may be realised in various ways (and please note that the term ‘rhetorical’ is not pejorative). Nevertheless, there are roughly two domains into which the concept has expanded among sociocultural anthropologists. One is that of sociality as a general trait of human beings, in contrast to the sociality of other species. It is this term that I want to use later in my particular case study, in which I detect a feature in human beings’ sociality which delivers a marked causal force. This general trait I will call for the moment sociality-h, for ‘human’.

The second sphere sits within sociocultural anthropology and faces toward the particular interests and obsessions of sociocultural anthropologists. This is the version of sociality pioneered largely by Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1996), who used the concept to cut through existing knots in anthropologists’ collective representations of gender, personhood, kinship, and social organisation. Her usage contrasted two

things: on one hand, anthropologists' existing terminology as an expression of Western folk sociology; and on the other, the practices and folk sociology of peoples in Melanesia. This usage soon lent itself to comparing differing versions of sociality. Hence I will call this 'sociality-e', for 'ethnographic', to designate its potential as a comparative ethnographic tool. This usage has slipped easily from sociality singular to socialities plural, just as 'culture' slipped to 'cultures'. Insofar as sociality-e has become routinised as a term of art, it is characteristically applied in the study of peoples with little hierarchical ranking or differential access to resources, such as those in Melanesia as characterised by Strathern (1988), in Amazonia (e.g. Overing and Passes 1998, McCallum 2001), or at the peripheries of states in Southeast Asia (Gibson and Sillander 2011). Sociality-e is especially useful – and has been especially exciting – because it puts aside such standard categories as 'society', 'kinship', or 'social structure', or standard oppositions such as individual vs. society, politics vs. domesticity, or female vs. male as biological or natural kinds, for all those ideas are imported from Our 'Western' scene. Sociality-e looks instead to whatever happens between people to create their distinctive life and forms of personhood. The reward has been to reveal those processes with greater fidelity, so that we can see more deeply into the intense and continual exchange of Melanesia, the blending of marked personal autonomy with mutual solidarity in peripheral Southeast Asia, or the conviviality of everyday life in Amazonia, and in any case this understanding of sociality helps to clarify the specific form that gender may take on one scene or another. But there has been a more general effect as well. First, sociality-e can be used to show how specific forms of person both create, and are created in, the inflected moment of interaction; and second, it encourages a focus on the evanescent but vitally important matter of interaction as a site of constant fecund motility which routinely produces both the new and the routine in social life.

Sociality-e has not been used to characterise highly hierarchical societies with differential access to resources, an extreme division of labour, and a plethora of different institutions, and in fact it has been

the contrast *against* such societies which has been important in the development of sociality-e. This is so in part because sociality-e arose in the study of societies with little ranking or differential access to material or cultural resource, but also because it was designed from the very beginning as an ethnographic tool for small scale settings where kinship, micropolitics, personhood and provisioning are indissolubly wedded together and cannot usefully be distinguished into separate institutions. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that sociality-e can also be applied as a guiding idea in the study of lesser scenes set within highly differentiated and institutionalised societies, scenes which are strictly limited and relatively egalitarian, such as electronic interactions-at-a-distance by people sharing a common interest (Long 2013), solidarity within a highly differentiated and conflictual order (Lazar 2013), or townspeople gathered for a shared aesthetic experience (Vergunst and Vermehren 2013).

Sociality-h

Sociality-h has quite a different history and significance. Its basic sense is just what Signe Howell suggested, namely a general inherited propensity of human beings to engage responsively and intensely with one another. However, the idea can be elaborated (Carrithers 1992, 2001) so as to answer two questions, and these questions are both quite different from the question/problem which sociality-e answered. The first is this: how does human sociality, sociality-h, resemble, and how does it differ from, the sociality of other species, notably that of other social primates? The purpose of opening the concept in that direction is straightforward: to find a conceptual language that might allow fruitful discussion between a sociocultural anthropology predicated on the uniqueness of the human species and an evolutionary anthropology, and especially primatology, predicated on the similarity of the human species to other species. The neighbouring usages of the concept of sociality, especially in primatology, are highly, and increasingly, sophisticated, and a comparison of their usages with ours might now be mutually illuminating.

But for the present I concentrate on the second question raised by sociality-h, which was directed inward, to sociocultural anthropology, just as sociality-e was. But where sociality-e envisioned anthropologists' problem to arise in the description and understanding of societies – or perhaps I'd better say: scenes – whose history is usually difficult to discern, sociality-h was addressed to a problem arising most visibly in the study of complex societies, societies which have a salient and investigable history of social and cultural change (and which, for that matter, possess multiple socialities-e within their smaller scenes, such as are found among the vastness of India, or China, or Europe, etc.). The problem was this: how can we account in general for the fact that social and cultural change are endemic throughout these – but in fact throughout all – versions of human life? And that phrase 'account in general' was meant to connect this facet of human sociality with the facet looking to evolutionary comparison. For from this perspective what is interestingly unique about our species is that its social forms constantly metamorphose such that we constantly create new social and cultural forms. Given that mutability, the sociality of our species consists not in one specifiable form of social arrangements, but rather in the plastic potential for a huge range of differing social organisations.

That potential can best be described as a set of cognitive and affective capacities which are, summed together, unique to our species. I gave one earlier account of these capacities (Carrithers 1992, 2001), and writers including Enfield and Levinson (2006), Toren (2013) and Tomasello (2014), have written more recently, and in different vocabularies, of those matters. For my purposes here, I re-describe our human sociality, though in terms which I believe to be consistent with those accounts. Sociality comprises:

- 1) The propensity to associate intensely and continuously with conspecifics.
- 2) An ability to direct each other's attention not only to a present object or topic, but also to an imagined, projected or remembered topic.

3) An ability to represent that imagined, projected or remembered topic in detail, an ability which reaches so far as to weave complex narratives of the soap opera of social life, as it has been, is, or might be.

4) An ability to engage each others such that we collude in a joint interpretation of what has passed and/or in a joint imagining of a present or a projected future.

5) An ability to perform mutually in line with such imaginings, and in so doing to institute joint action among a company of persons to some more or less enduring end.

6) The ability to create and adopt different, and new, forms of interaction and bodily habitus, and therefore new forms of social organisation and behaviour.

I mean this (re-)description of human sociality to underpin one of the things we seem to be able to do so well, and that is, *we create institutions*. In principle a full description of this version of sociality, sociality-h, would be both evolutionary and historical. It would be evolutionary in the sense that it would distinguish a process of natural selection which laid down a groundwork of that institutionalising potential. It would be historical, though, in that it would also show how we have also produced, and used, culturally transmissible tools — among them skills of engaging one another, forms of speech and gesture, and a repertoire of symbolic representations — all of which are fundamental to the persuading, teaching, and moving rhetorical work of creating institutions.

But in any case even a casual survey of our present world lavishly illustrates our human genius for creating institutions. Each of us may, in a single day, move through a wide range of institutions, from home to school to place of business to place of worship to voluntary organisation. We may act as patient to a doctor in one sort of institution or customer to a salesperson in another. There are far less differentiated institutional settings found elsewhere and elsewhere: think, for example, of Pueblo Amerindians of the US Southwest, with their long-established and elaborate sacred societies, whose performances are so sharply marked off from performances in everyday

social experience; or of the cargo cults of Melanesia, where we can at least discern some account of the institutions' origins. And if we came to the Chewong studied by Howell, we might speculate that they have invented but one institution, namely Chewong society itself.

Some institutions are relatively short-lived, such as student societies which arise, flourish for perhaps a year or two, until their enthusiasts graduate, and then disappear. Others have much greater longevity. The Buddhist Sangha, the Order of monks, to which I now turn, has persisted in one form or another for well over two millennia.

Another broad brush

The case I present concerns an institution among the Sangha in Sri Lanka, the Śrī Kalyāṇī Yogāśrama Saṃsthāva, which I will translate as the Sri Kalyani Hermitage Institute, hereinafter the Institute. The Institute was founded in 1951 and flourishes still today. The material I present here, though, derives mostly from the period 1972-1975 (as laid out in detail in Carrithers 1983).

First, though, I sketch the background. The Sangha, the Buddhist Order of monks, is understood to be descended from those who first joined the Buddha after his enlightenment, so that, in principle at least, there is an unbroken line of celibate monks, each generation ordained by its predecessors, stretching back to his time. Its purpose is understood to be twofold, to preserve and transmit the teachings of the Buddha to both monks and laity, and to train its members in discipline and self-cultivation through meditation so that they may attain release from the cycle of worldly suffering. These purposes are served in part by a detailed code for the monks' behaviour, even down to the level of posture and style of movement, and particularly by the provision that they hold few worldly goods and gain their livelihood through mendicancy. The very word for monk in the ancient Pali language is *bhikkhu*, meaning 'beggar', though the understanding is not that the monks are passive objects of mere charity, but rather that they offer teaching (=preaching) of the Buddha's discoveries to the laity, in exchange for material support, and members of the Sangha

have always been treated by the laity with elaborate honour, often in the idiom of respect shown by commoners to nobility or royalty.

As the Sangha's history unfolded — and indeed from very early on — it emerged that there was a logic in this situation that played out to produce similar results again and again (I write chiefly of the Theravadin world, the Buddhism of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka). First, the two purposes, self-cultivation on the one hand and transmission of the teaching on the other, turned out to be, to a degree at least, contradictory. The preservation, promulgation, and especially the more or less ceremonial use of the Buddha's teachings became, for many, their chief or only concern. This fact is recognised in various designations in the texts for monks as 'preachers' as opposed to 'ascetics', 'village-dwellers' versus 'forest-dwellers', or devoting themselves to 'book duty' as opposed to 'meditation duty'. The preachers and village-dwellers, probably the vast majority of monks throughout Sangha history, came to be a constituent of (in this case) Sri Lankan agrarian society, such that their 'book duty' amounted in effect to playing a ritual role with respect to the laity. In this respect it might seem reasonable to translate the Sinhalese term for these functionaries as 'priests', but the idea, and to a degree the practice, of asceticism and religious poverty still adheres to them, at the very least as a position from which they may be routinely criticised as less than ideal, so I will stick with 'monks'. Sinhalese Buddhists are today keenly aware of the distinction to be made between 'forest monks' as a category — those devoted to meditation and to the strictest observance of monastic discipline — and common village monks.

Second, the logic of treating monks in the idiom of aristocracy or royalty, though meant in principle to show respect for their spiritual heroism as ascetics and representatives of the highest human values, possessed other fertile possibilities as well, namely that they might become recipients, not only of the quotidian needs of food, clothing and shelter, but also of land, itself transferable wealth in a more or less feudal agrarian social order. And since a gift of land in such circumstances also entailed a gift of those who till the land and

produce the wealth, the Sangha became lords in fact as well as in metaphor.

I have used the term ‘domestication’ to describe this large package of what Weber called ‘unintended consequences’, for it captures the sense in which the Sangha began as a more or less itinerant body of people ‘gone forth from home into homelessness’ — so it is represented in the earliest texts — but ended in Sri Lanka as routine and sedentary institution and a settled constituent of the Sinhalese polity. Viewed from the top down, there were populous and well-provisioned monastic establishments in the various Sinhalese capitals throughout history — Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy — which received largesse from, and in turn legitimated, the royal and aristocratic hegemony. It is somewhat harder to see how this looked from the bottom up, at least over the millennia I am sketching here, but certainly within the colonial period and afterwards the Sinhalese view of a proper village is one with its own resident monks, their residence, and an accompanying temple with Buddha image (though there have been many settlements, especially among lower castes and the poor, and those in remote areas, that have not enjoyed these amenities).

The Institute gets started

Which takes us to the year of Sri Lanka’s (then Ceylon’s) independence in 1948, which was strongly associated with the approaching 2500th anniversary of the founding of Buddhism itself, to be celebrated in 1956. Among the many voices raised by this symbolically and rhetorically fertile conjunction was that of the Venerable Kadavädduve Jinavamsa, who at first wrote at first to the press, then broadcast over Radio Ceylon, calling for a revival of Buddhism in general and a renewal of the original Sangha’s principles and practices in particular.

For in fact the village Sangha in which he was raised since childhood was one which was thoroughly domesticated (in my sense of the term). Many temples possessed productive land and large and comfortable monks’ dwellings. Jinavamsa himself was called to be a monk, so to

speak, when he was ten years old; but that call issued, not from an inner voice, but from an uncle whose monastic property the child was meant eventually to inherit. Most monks were considerably better fed than those around them. In response to these creature comforts, the monks were understood mainly as officiants on ceremonial occasions. In general these occasions are called ‘merit-making’ (*pinkam*), the underlying idea being that lay people accrue spiritual merit, for themselves or for loved ones, by their sacrifice of goods to support the monks. These occasions might include a sermonising when receiving their meal, or even just a few words of spiritual advice when accepting some goods to be used at the temple. More formal merit-making occurs when officiating at funerals (but not other life-crisis rituals) or presiding at *pirit* ceremonies. These last could be simple affairs of a few hours or indeed a vastly expensive affairs in which a well to do family of laity invited people from round about to attend and receive both generous cooking and the auspicious influences of the Buddha’s teachings, chanted in a musical form (and in its original language, Pali, incomprehensible to the laity). *Pirit* might be conducted through a long night or even over several nights by many monks, and the monks might be seated in a more or less expensively decorated temporary ceremonial structure. From the lay point of view, such outlay is meant to purchase an auspicious beginning – for a newborn child, or a newborn business, or a dangerous journey, say –, or to fend off misfortune in its many manifestations, whether present or feared. From many monks’ point of view, the ability to lay on a fitting *pirit* performance would be the height of their vocational achievement.

So this more or less propertied Sangha which Jinavamsa criticised was in fact necessary to the conduct of proper Sinhalese Buddhist village life. Yet alongside the general awareness of the indispensable role the Sangha plays there also exists a common trope in Sinhalese discussion of religious affairs that the Sangha as it exists is woefully short in monastic discipline and learning but keen to defend its wealth and comforts. I heard this awareness expressed in many ways, but the most succinct critique was that of an English-speaking layman who said, ‘when I worship [a monk], I worship the robe [that is, the Sangha

as it should be], not these rogues and buggers' ('rogues and buggers' being a phrase for miscreants and villains).

Jinavamsa wrote in a far more elevated style, but his published critique was vividly expressive of both the current corrupted character of the Sangha and of the ideal character of the Sangha as originally laid out by the Buddha. The Sangha's role, as he said to me, reprising what he said to the nation at large, should be that of a lantern, lighting the way by example to a moral form of life among the laity and a disciplined and meditative way of life among the monks. By 1950 he had begun to turn this critique into action by collecting support for an active reform. By 1951 Jinavamsa founded the Institute, and by 1956, that highly charged year for Sinhalese Buddhists, the Institute was well established and flourishing, and continued thereafter as an intentionally limited, small but healthy and firmly principled expression of a monk's way of life, a way of life which remains largely at odds with the practices of much of the routine village Sangha round about.

Sociality as a ground for institutionalising

The story of that development is laid out in detail in Carrithers 1983. It was certainly a remarkable achievement and a tribute to Jinavamsa's imagination, eloquence, energy and strength of character, but I will not recount those events here. Rather, I will touch on those features in the development of the Institute that give flesh to the bones of the particular construction I wish to give to the concept of sociality here. I reserve for the moment discussion of the first characteristics of sociality laid out above, namely the 1) the propensity to associate with conspecifics, for that is more the cap of my argument than the base. And I will pass over the second, 2) the ability to direct others' attention, because much of the interest there lies in the ontogeny, in childhood, of sociality's more complex features.

Feature 3) is the ability to weave even very complex stories of a past, present and/or future. I (and others) have written of this narrative capacity insofar as it enables the creation of some sense of order in the midst of the constant complexity, uncertainty and motility

of human social life. What I want to remark on here is the sheer scale of the narrative, and so of the company of characters that inhabit it. In the first place there is a 'we' who were implicit, and often explicit, protagonists in Jinavamsa's narrative, namely Buddhist Sinhalese as a whole. This is a story similar to other stories of accomplished nationalism in our world of nationalisms, of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' which stretch so far beyond the immediate face-to-face world of any given sociality-e. And that sense of imagined others stretches back 2500 years to the founding of Buddhism in India, a temporal scale which comprehends as well an idealised and enduring Sangha, living across those centuries and still vibrantly important as characters placed against whatever vices any present and actually experienced members of the Sangha may offer. We can say this as well of Jinavamsa's narrative, namely that it is not only spaciouly imagined and capable of placing present persons in a far larger frame, but also that, by its contrast of the desirable and the actual, it is capable of projecting a possible future as well.

Feature 4), colluding in a *joint* imagining of a situation, recognises the effective rhetorical force which may be achieved by one such as Jinavamsa addressing his narrative of the situation to the others whom he wishes to involve. It is notable, true, that his eloquence was borne by mass media, newspapers and then radio. Such media support and enhance the persuasive force of nationalism, as Benedict observed. But more to the point, the creation of the Institute required the recruitment of both lay supporters and monks. The lay supporters would be those willing to fund the building and provisioning of monasteries devoted to Jinavamsa's vision, and the monks those willing to put themselves and their future lives in his (and his fellows') hands. The first to respond was a well-to-do layman, who offered the considerable resources of his family's fortune to the purchase of land and the building of a first monastery. Subsequently other wealthy people, but also associations here and there of poorer but enthusiastic lay supporters, came forward to offer their resources. It is especially remarkable that many of these knew of Jinavamsa only through Radio Ceylon or the newspapers; so in effect his eloquence reached out to

total strangers to draw them in to a joint imagining. Similarly, the first large tranche of novices-to-be were recruited through a newspaper advertisement.

Here I want to mark, not some causal role played by the media, and indeed Jinavamsa's achievement depended also on word of mouth which reached beyond his immediate sphere. Rather, I am concerned with the capacity of an imagining, however conveyed, to lay the ground for collusion beyond the sphere of those already personally known face-to-face. Given the right circumstances, our human sociality connects beyond immediate experience, and beyond our known fellows, such that people can not only agree with distant others, but can also jointly act with those others – my feature number 5) – to realise a common project.

Feature 6), the capacity to adopt – in this case, in adulthood – new forms of relating and new forms of behaviour, is the necessary ground for the Institute's final success. For the full form of monastic life envisioned by Jinavamsa and his colleagues, and of relations to the laity, were sufficiently unlike the routines then expected of monks and laity that they amounted to what one opponent – and there were many opponents to Jinavamsa and his colleagues – called 'an alien way of working'. Though the rhetoric of the Institute was based thoroughly on the past as still preserved in (mostly unread) texts, the reality in the present was that they were laying out a largely unfamiliar approach. This included not only the revival of the full range of prescribed monastic life, but also the revival of the highly circumscribed relations between monks and laity. Thus, as a minor example, I witnessed a family who brought some kerosene, honey and fresh fruit to offer to Jinavamsa one afternoon. They had come to offer merit for a child who had died. He told them that he could accept the honey and kerosene, because they are allowed to be kept, but he could not accept the fruit, as monks are not to receive solid food after noon. They were puzzled and remonstrated that they routinely gave such gifts to their local monk. Jinavamsa replied that nevertheless that is the rule, and that they could anyway give the fruit to the lay helpers in the kitchen to make juice. Such encounters have

been multiplied across many issues in the history of the Institute, and mark how different their institutional style is from the surrounding monastic culture.

So there is what might be called the routinely remarkable sociality that the Institute and its founding bring to light – a sociality that might interestingly bear comparison with that of our fellow primates. Given the circumstances, we may begin to socialise with far-off people we have never met before, and enter into new relations of trust and mutual collusion with relative strangers; we may undertake to invent and cultivate new forms of organisation and new styles of relationship: and we may, in mid-life, undertake voluntarily to live wholly with strangers, and to conduct ourselves within novel styles of behaviour, all so different from our natal styles and persons that we in effect move into a different world. In the case of the Institute's newly ordained monks, it amounts to joining what Goffman called a 'total institution'.

But note, too, that such detachment from one scene and attachment to another, though it is played out dramatically by the monks and supporters of the Institute, is nevertheless but one version of a kind of change that is much more widespread among our species. For in that respect many others, for example, migrants, traders, and indeed ethnographers likewise leave behind intimately familiar worlds to plunge into new ones in the pursuit of their various projects.

Sociality as a force in itself

In these respects sociality amounts to no more than a potential for association, a native propensity in our species that can be manipulated and cultivated to create our huge variety of organisational forms. There is, however, another side to sociality, demonstrated richly in the founding and organisation of the Institute, that is not nearly so congenial to the founders' purposes.

To understand that, let me return for a moment to the role of the Sangha as a constituent of fully formed social life in Buddhist Sri Lanka, and that is its role in merit-making. On one hand, merit-making does possess a rationale, in that the act of giving to the monks

produces merit, a sort of spiritual good which may be applied either to the merit-maker herself, in that it may help or protect some future project or life, or it may be transferred to a loved one for their benefit, and often for a loved one who has passed away, that they might prosper as they move into their next life. That rationale, however, does not quite capture the sense of intimacy and visceral importance that merit-making may have for a lay person. To capture that, we might better think of merit-making as a rightful, praiseworthy, and necessary accompaniment to one's anxious concern for the well-being of oneself and one's family at moments of actual or foreseeable crisis. The effort and goods sacrificed are sacrificed to the monks for the monks' well-being, of course, but are sacrificed on behalf of one's loved ones and their well-being, and in that respect the focus is far less on the monks than on the loved ones themselves. So the family mentioned earlier, who brought the fruit and other gifts to Jinavamsa, were dealing less with him than with the dead child and their own crisis.

So there is a powerful and perennial demand for monks, any monks, to provide these services. The situation, though, is not quite that simple. On one hand, the demand is for monks to provide the services in a way conformable to the laity's expectations. In this respect the family would have been better off giving to the monk back home, who would have accepted the gifts without demur, rather than to Jinavamsa. On the other hand, forest monks are especially desirable recipients, since they are particularly virtuous and therefore especially meritorious vessels for merit-making. So to a considerable degree forest monks are victims of their own virtue, in that they are in high demand. They become objects of what Gananath Obeyesekere once called 'the relentless piety of the masses' (personal communication).

This circumstance was advantageous to the Institute, of course, in that lay support was, after a certain point, more or less readily forthcoming. Yet it exposed the monks to a pressure which was often inconsistent with their mission. The consequences of this pressure were plentifully demonstrated in the first years of the Institute's founding, because Jinavamsa found, on several occasions, that he and

his colleagues were compelled to sever their connection with a monastery, and sometimes one purpose-built for them and in circumstances threatening the very existence of the Institute. For even though he was at pains to explain to supporters the rules under which the Institute operates (rules largely given by the ancient monastic code, but in some cases enhanced by their own regulations) nevertheless the local laity in one place or another refused to accept those limitations, since they were accustomed to monks who made themselves freely available well beyond the then disused and more or less forgotten monastic code.

It is in this general situation, this tension, that my attention was first drawn to the potential of sociality to be not just a propensity or potential which could be realised through institutions, but in fact a separate causal force in its own right. Here is what happened. In the course of its expansion, the Institute came to have about forty monastery / forest hermitages, among which about one hundred monks were distributed. This meant that, in practice, many of the hermitages sheltered only one or two monks, while some of the larger sites would shelter considerably more. It was relatively easier for a larger concentration of monks to adhere strictly to the code, but when exposed in ones or twos, experience showed that it was more difficult. And indeed it turned out that, when a monk was exposed for a matter of many months or a few years to the demands of the local laity, there was a marked tendency for the monk increasingly to give in to lay demands, and so for monastic discipline to suffer (though not so much by serious breach as by the falling away from many minor rules and the encroachment on solitude and meditation). As this circumstance dawned on Jinavamsa and his colleagues, they realised that they would have to find an answer, and they did so. They found that, if they transferred monks relatively frequently from one hermitage to another, this situation, a disastrous one in their eyes, could be avoided. Thus one monk pupil of Jinavamsa, Gunananda, who was among that first intake of aspirants who answered the newspaper ad, had lived in a total of eighteen different hermitages in the twenty-five years he had spent in the Institute when I talked to him.

Jinavamsa, and indeed Gunananda, were very clear about how this would come about in most cases. For it would usually be far less the attractions of some material goods or comforts for the offending monk, but rather more a matter of a growing affection between the monk and his local lay supporters. Or as a monk in a different setting put it, it would come about by an inappropriate excess of compassion – one of the cardinal Buddhist virtues – on the part of the monk, in that he would be responding to the visceral needs of the laity as they dealt with the vicissitudes of life through merit-making. So, as a minor example, the Institute's own rules would not allow monks to participate in an all-night *pirit* ceremony, but a lay family dealing with a major crisis or turning point might wish to recognise that occasion with that more elaborate form of merit-making.

There is, however, a much larger point to be made here, and it might best be made using the social phenomenological vocabulary of Alfred Schütz. He differentiated between two ways of experiencing others in social life. On one hand, there are those with whom we 'grow old together', who are part of our 'onrolling' life. These are our more or less intimate friends, family and neighbours, whose idiosyncrasies, stories, hopes and fears we know and perhaps share. These he called *Mitmenschen*, which I will translate as 'familiar' (this term has elsewhere been translated as 'consociates'). On the other hand there are those whom we know only distantly and largely as types, people with whom we can relate, if necessary, according to a more or less set script: I know X as a doctor, and know how to act when I visit her surgery, I know Y as a policeman and know how to treat him when we meet in the street. There are many other types too – soldiers and businesswomen, Germans and Chinese, and indeed men and women. These are people with whom we only share the same time, he called *Nebemmenschen*, translated as 'contemporaries'.

So what happened as monks lived longer and longer among one group of laity was just that they grew closer to them, coming to know them, not as contemporaries who relate to them as contemporaries, not *laity* relating to *monks*, but as individuals known

increasingly to each other by their name, their sight, their stories and their needs and vulnerabilities.

They became *familiars* to one another.

And it is just this tendency, the growing together of people through long and longer association, that represents the independently causal force of sociality. In the assembling of the Institute, that potential or propensity of sociality was well harnessed by Jinavamsa and colleagues, so that their rhetorical efforts would draw people to them in a carefully monitored and described form. In other words, the Institute was composed through a careful process of keeping relations between monks and laity, and indeed between monks, within the bounds of a formality that Schütz would have recognised as one between contemporaries. Once released into the wild, so to speak, the monks of the Institute were exposed to the force of more or less unbridled sociality, a magnetic process which reveals human sociality as being, on occasion, much more than just a propensity or a potential. Affection, mutual regard, and mutual care grow naturally, in effect, even when a person so disciplined and constrained as a forest monk meets his fellow human beings and comes to know their stories and needs among the vicissitudes of life.

In the longer run, I have argued — though not in this vocabulary and long before I began thinking about sociality or heard of Schütz —, that this process of the monk coming to know the layman, so that they are no longer facing one another in their roles but in their individualities, as the Venerable Ananda, say, facing Punchi Banda, is a powerful driving force, among others, in the Sangha's domestication. And in a larger view the attractive potential in sociality can be a spanner in the works of, well, all sorts of Fordist industrial institutions, and indeed in any institution that seeks to maintain itself through neatly delineated roles and scripts. Some of us may also speak of this from personal experience, for as a *pupil* in school one may sometimes fail dismally in relation to *teachers* because of the intensity of sociality with other *pupils*. (Frank Sanchez and especially Michael Carrithers used to get in terrible trouble, messing around in class.)

On the other hand, powerfully attracting sociality can become a vital force in the maintenance and prospering of institutions. Thus armies are known to work best when they consist of units each of which is a 'band of brothers'. And this is true of the Institute as well. Thus at one of the remotest forest hermitages associated with the Institute, Kudumbigala, the chief monk there, the Venerable Anandasiri, and his fellows maintained a spirit of lively awareness of each other's needs and circumstances. In this he found echoes, too, in one of his favourite Pali scriptures, which reads thus, in the words of the monk in whose mouth the sentiment is placed:

I am disposed in mind, speech, and body to acts of loving-kindness towards [my fellow monks], whether openly or in secret. Hence we each think: why not give up my own will, and act by the will of those venerable colleagues? And we do so. Our bodies are several, Sir, but our mind is surely one. (For the reference see Carrithers 1983:287.)

It is difficult for an ethnographer, even one so kindly and openly treated as I was by the monks of the Institute, to know for certain the extent to which this force of sociality, internal to the institution, is at work. But insofar as I can make the judgment, it seemed clear to me at the time, and now, that there was a general growing-together among the monks of the Institute that provided for its longevity and relative health. It is far easier to discern sociality as an independent causal force, though, when it is exposed between institutions, as it is in the relationship between the hermitage monks and the laity.

Concluding

The concept of sociality has been variously adapted and cultivated by different anthropologists and by different sub-disciplines in a larger Anthropology. Each has added further detail and explored different entailments of the naked idea itself. Thus primatologists have, over the years, created a vocabulary of types of primate society, and even, gradually, begun to think about the evolution of those types of

sociality. Within sociocultural anthropology the concept has been adapted in two chief forms to solve two very different kinds of problem. For Strathern and others, the term's use has been elaborated to explore the face-to-face creation of different forms of personhood and association in relatively egalitarian circumstances. I, on the other hand, have adopted the idea, from evolutionary biologists, in order to create a possible interface with primatology, and simultaneously to develop a vocabulary for the capacities which underlie human social and cultural inventiveness. In this essay I have tried to create an elementary guide through the thicket that the concept is threatening to become, at least to sociocultural anthropologists. I have also re-described those further attributes of human sociality in order to see how they support one sort of thing that our sort of animal does, and that is, we create institutions. And I have also dealt, I hope effectively, with a feature of sociality which appears only on occasion, though frequently enough, and that is when it becomes a force which counters and erodes human attempts to render institutions predictable and controllable. That dimension of sociality I have called a causal force, because it seems to live a life of its own, with unforeseeable results, working sometimes with, but sometimes against, our species' inventions of purposeful regulation.

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